DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 332 537 FL 019 181

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TITLE Beyond Drill and Filler: The Computer/Composition Connection.
PUB DATE Mar 90
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Central States Conference on Language Teaching (22nd, Minneapolis, MN, March 15-18, 1990).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Class Size; *Computer Assisted Instruction; Higher Education; Language Proficiency; *Second Language Instruction; Second Language Learning; Spanish; Teaching Methods; *Writing (Composition); Writing Assignments

ABSTRACT

In choosing to have students use the computer in unstructured writing activities, the instructor may prefer to cover basics during classroom sessions and have students use technological aids to expand on these basics in outside assignments. Out-of-class composition assignments force students to create with these basics on their own. Students use word processing programs rather than "drill-and-filler" software; their goal is not to learn the patterns of the target language but to use what they know to create their own meaning. Language teachers have been slow to use the computer in teaching composition and equally slow in reporting the results of their experiences. Observations are presented on the basis of a three-semester project to increase the use of computers in the writing segments of four intermediate and advanced Spanish classes. It is concluded that the use of the computer in teaching foreign language composition has tremendous advantages, regardless of the content of the course or the way that the composition component is incorporated into the course. There are, however, several factors that will affect the efficacy of computer use. These include: (1) level of class; (2) size of class; (3) nature of assignment; and (4) individual versus group work. (JL)

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Beyond Drill and Filler:

The Computer/Composition Connection

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Technology-assisted instruction has fascinated foreign language teachers for many years. Veterans in the profession recall the reel-to-reel tapes with their endless repetition and substitution drills which were so popular during the period in which the audio-lingual method prevailed. So valued was technology during this movement that there was some concern that tape recorders might replace teachers.

Today the fascination with technology is no less intense. The videodisc and the interactive computer program are the current "cutting edge" technologies. However, the profession recognizes that technology may supplement, but never supplant, classroom instruction which is guided by a teacher (Quinn, 298).

There are few instructors today who would regard the use of technology to support foreign language teaching as trendy or faddish. Most would recognize that the grammatical content which has so long been central to the language program lacks context without the cultural

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insights which films and videotapes contribute. Instructors who are familiar with the number of hours required to bring their students to intermediate- or advanced-level proficiency are extremely interested in finding audio or computer programs which will expand their students' time on task in some meaningful fashion.

There is no "one true way" to incorporate technology into foreign language instruction. As Diane Birchbichler told us last year at this conference, all strategies have their place in the total foreign language teaching process (61). One instructor may prefer to cover basics during classroom sessions and have students use technological aids to expand on these basics in outside assignments. Another may see memorization and drill as activities best relegated to the language lab or the computer; the classroom then becomes the place where students use their knowledge creatively.

In choosing to have students use the computer in relatively unstructured writing activities, one elects the first model. Basics are covered in class; out-of-class composition assignments force students to create with these basics on their own. Students use word-processing

programs rather than drill-and-filler software; their goal is not to learn the patterns of the target language but to use what they know to create their own meaning.

In spite of the fact that many foreign language teachers use computers in their own writing, they have been slow to use the computer in teaching composition and equally slow (or even slower) in reporting the results of their experiences. The following observations are made on the basis of a three-semester project to increase the use of computers in the writing segments of four intermediate and advanced Spanish classes. The experiment was successful, but not without problems. The observations I will make today are primarily my own. To the extent that my comments reflect the attitudes of students, this data comes from anecdotal surveys conducted in each of the four classes.

The use of the computer in teaching foreign language composition has tremendous advantages. Students are able to spot errors more readily and, as a consequence, the frequency of certain error types is reduced. The primary advantage, however, is evident in those writing projects where frequent revision is necessary. The computer allows students to make discrete changes without rewriting or retyping the entire work.

An additional advantage of the computer/composition connection is that students may be free from the constraints which have hampered them in using skill-getting software. In many instances, the student is free from the limitations of a particular piece of software. To compose on the computer, students may use any word-processing software they choose.

Students are also free from the confines of the language laboratory or the site where departmental/course software is housed. Although this may seem a small matter (and may not even be the case if, for any reason, the instructor imposes a particular software/hardware combination), students frequently find it difficult to visit the lab when it is open. Since most activities they perform in the lab are teacher-specified, students tend to take less responsibility for their own learning process when they are on official turf.

Encouraging students to use the computer for writing activities has advantages regardless of the content of the course and/or the way in which the composition component of the course is included. There are, however, a number of factors which will affect the efficacy of computer use. Some of the most important factors are: (1) level of class, (2) size of class, (3) nature of assignment, (4) individual vs. group work.

Students who have a less-than-rudimentary level of knowledge of the target language will not be able to make the fullest use of the computer in developing a composition. Although one can imagine circumstances in which the computer could be used in introductory-level classes, this study found that more advanced students made better use of the computer. Similarly, the better, more motivated students in intermediate-level classes gained more from computer use than those students who regarded the course merely as a requirement for graduation.

To this somewhat tautological observation, it should be added that using a computer improved the performance of some students on the composition portion of the course. Students indicated that they read their computer-prepared compositions more closely than either a hand-written or typed product. They were also more likely to revise and reprint a computer-generated composition before submitting it, since to do so required little work.

In some instances, computer use also seemed to affect self-image with a resulting positive impact on general classroom performance. Mediocre students who had had no experience using the computer prior to their composition work in intermediate Spanish became more confident and interested as they learned to use the computer. Their image of

themselves as competent and capable individuals resulted in a new seriousness about their academic work which, in turn, resulted in a better performance in Spanish.

The size of the class also affects the effectiveness of computer use in writing assignments. In this instance it is difficult to see a great difference between compositions generated on the computer and those which were generated in some other way. The smaller the class (and, one may hypothesize, the lower the total teaching load of the instructor) the greater the time available for individual analysis of compositions. For this reason, not surprisingly, the best results in the classes observed came from a small, advanced seminar limited to only two students.

The size and level of this class contributed to its success. Another important factor was the way in which the class was scheduled. While the intermediate classes included in the study met for only fifty minutes, the seminar met for periods of two to two-and-a-half hours. Although this resulted in some deadly sessions when the students and the instructor were not adequately prepared or motivated, it also produced some excellent working sessions which allowed time for creation, analysis and rewrite within a single class period.

As this observation may indicate, the kind of composition assignments given determine the role and effectiveness of the computer. Although the computer is an asset in any writing project, it is particularly useful when development and rewriting are an important part of the assignment. One of the most effective assignments given during the three-semester project required students, working in groups of three to five people, to write a short story. They began with 100 words and added 50 words a week until they had reached a minimum of six hundred words. (Most of the students surpassed this minimum; it was not uncommon to receive compositions of one thousand or fifteen hundred words.)

The compositions in these classes were not graded each week. In fact, after approximately seven weeks the students were allowed to turn in work at their own discretion. They were required to meet a final deadline with a story of a specified length but they could choose not to submit weekly drafts.

When students submitted work, it was marked using a correction key. Students were asked to correct the obvious errors (accent, agreement) by themselves and to see the instructor for assistance with

problems. No limit was placed on the number of drafts they could submit or the number of times they could consult with the instructor.

This assignment was an effective way of teaching composition. It required that the intermediate-level students develop a much longer piece of writing than would normally have been feasible at this level. The assignment also demanded that the students consider what they had written and that they develop their capacity for screening their own errors. Although no studies have been done to assess the long-term effects of any given teaching strategy on proficiency, the short-term effect of this assignment on the students' writing skills was positive. The students showed a marked improvement in their ability to write on familiar topics in testing situations.

Virtually every methods text discusses the value of peer involvement in writing activities. Small group work with computer-generated compositions is particularly appropriate. A significant number (37%) of the students in the classes studied reported little if any background with the computer. Such students saw the composition assignment as less threatening if they were working with a team. Although the reduction of anxiety was noted most often as it related to the technical aspect of the assignment . . . the use of the computer . . .

students also reported feeling more positive about the composition aspect as well. This was particularly true of students whose previous language training had included little work in composition.

Writing is a difficult skill and one which has been both neglected and devalued. When one hears of the problems students have in writing English, it is difficult to be sanguine about the prospect of their developing this skill in a foreign language. In her excellent text, Teaching Language in Context, Alice Omaggio cites a study by Ann Nerenz that showed only 0.2 percent of available foreign language class time devoted to writing (223). Sally Magnan attributes this problem to the influence of the audio-lingual movement, to claims that writing practice is non-productive and time-consuming and to the belief that students do not need to write in the target language "in an authentic language use situation" (Omaggio, 223).

However, Magnan sees students' native-language composition problems as one strong reason for encouraging writing practice in the second language. Beyond the focus on grammar and accurate spelling which such practice brings, students may be taught skills such as organization and elaboration which will carry over to their writing in English (Omaggio, 224).

Added to this reason for encouraging writing in the foreign language is the view that writing is "slowed speech." The primary goal of our students in studying a foreign language may be to talk to the speakers of the language. Often, however, they still cling to the romantic notion that one day (usually sometime in the second year of language study) they will simply open their mouths and the words will pour out.

Although the many new strategies devised by those who teach for proficiency will doubtless hasten the moment when our students can communicate with satisfactory competence, there is surely value in giving them practice in organizing and expressing their thoughts in written form. The anxiety which most students feel in speaking a foreign language is absent in writing. They can make mistakes and erase (or delete) them before anyone sees them. They can take time in writing which is usually denied them in speaking situations.

Writing is a skill which should be developed for its own sake and as a precursor to speaking. The computer can be a valuable aid in developing this skill. It frees the student to write more and to revise what they have written. The computer provides copy which is readable and may help students to notice and eliminate a greater number of errors.

Computer-assisted instruction in the foreign language need not be confined to games or to workbook-like activities. Although software programs of this type have their place, students must learn to see the computer as a tool which allows them to do more than develop skills. Students and instructors in the foreign language should go beyond drill and filler to find and use the computer/composition connection.

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